

NEVADA Connections

Produced by Community College Southern Nevada to connect resources for Nevada's adult workforce

Volume 9 Number 1

July 2003

Reading lessons learned — by students and teachers!

Does a curriculum of essay study and novels help advanced ESL students develop the higher level thinking skills required to succeed on the GED Reading Test?

Editor's note: Experienced Great Basin College Instructor Sue Bettles built on ABE/ESL Coordinator Meachell Lasalle's idea and materials to develop and implement this creative project. Using (relatively little) special project funding and (very significant) time, talent, and energy, she guided her students to healthy gains and learned how she might increase them even more. Here is her summary of her project.

From January through May, I ran a pilot program for my advanced ESL students. It was designed to see if direct instruction in different types of literary genres would help them improve their reading comprehension scores on the GED Test. Additionally, I wanted to see if having copies of books and a detailed syllabus to take home would help those students who cannot attend classes everyday.

Curriculum

The students studied from a textbook (*Journeys Near and Far 2* by Linda Best and Jessie M. Reppy) that combined different reading selections into themes. Most of the passages were non-fiction with a few poems and fiction prose. The book provided practice in previewing, comprehension, analysis, and vocabulary building.

We also read *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, a novel about a utopian society where all differences among the citizens have been eliminated as much as possible to produce a society devoid of dissent and unpleasantness. Many scaffolding devices such as focus questions, a study guide and daily discussions were provided for the class since this was probably the first full-length book in English that many of them had read. We spent a lot of time discussing the literary devices used in the book, such as irony, euphemism and flashback. Themes were discussed vis-à-vis the students' lives.

Near the end of the program, the students were given the book *Holes* by Louis Sachar, which had less scaffolding since it was an easier book in language and theme but included a list of guiding questions and a graphic organizer for keeping track of the characters. There was only one class discussion prior to taking the test on the book. Only three students out of 17 finished the book by the end of the semester.

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Outcomes

The students' attitudes toward the program were positive. The many I spoke to felt that the books chosen — and the ability to take them home — helped them learn more than previous classes. The results seemed to bear this out. Overall, the students showed a 10% increase in scores on the strictly timed pre- and post-tests.

In retrospect, expecting these students to read two novels in one semester is too ambitious.

After giving the pre-test in January, I saw that some students reacted negatively to timed tests, so I allowed them to finish the post-test after marking the items unanswered at 65 minutes (the allotted testing time). The students showed a gain of 17% untimed. While this

process is not technically valid since I didn't allow them to finish the pre-test untimed, I think it shows that their improvement in comprehension is greater than the timed test results show.

Lessons learned

The students weren't satisfied with their results. Most felt that they had learned more than they demonstrated on the test. Because of that I plan to make the following changes to my curriculum:

- Modify the textbook and novel selections. I am looking for a textbook that more closely reflects the make-up of the GED Reading Test, which is 40% fiction to 30% non-fiction prose, than does *Journeys Near and Far 2*. Or I would supplement *Journeys* and *The Giver* with more fictional short stories.

Alternatively, I am considering using *To Kill a Mockingbird* as the novel for the next class.

- Briefly cover poetry and drama, but not spend too much time on them since they represent only 15% each of the material on the Test.
- Do a short unit on test-taking skills, especially time management. Almost every one of my students didn't know to skip the hard questions and come back to them later!
- Give plenty of simulated GED tests near the end of the class to let the students practice their new reading skills in the type of situation they will experience when taking the GED Tests.

For more information, contact Sue at bettles@gbcnv.edu, 775/753-2109.

Adult ESL students face a problem that other students don't have on the GED: it takes more time to read in a foreign language. The GED scores, however, are normed for native English speakers. For our ESL students to pass the GED, we have to provide them with instruction that closely matches the type of material and situation that they will experience when testing. I think that with the changes outlined, this curriculum should help our students be successful.

Fast Fact

According to studies done by Dr. Todd Risley and his colleague Betty Hart, by age three, the average American child in a welfare family may have 10 million fewer words of cumulative language experience than the average child in a working-class family.

Source: *Momentum* (National Center for Family Literacy newsletter) 11/02

MY APPRECIATION OF YOU

Editor's note: TMCC Curriculum Coordinator Claudia Bianca-DeBay wrote this poem for her ESL teachers. I suspect she speaks for many of us — and to ABE teachers, as well.

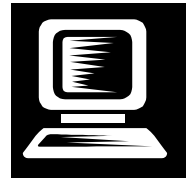
I see you walking down the hall, looking down as you go, deep in thought -
Battle weary from another day of life -
And yet you push through your feelings of hunger and exhaustion
Knowing that you will, once again, be facing a large, eager group of students
Who look to YOU to keep THEM awake,
To help them forget their problems, frustrations and stress for two hours
While they work toward their dream of learning English -
They look to YOU to make it fun, make it relevant, make it conquerable -
So you look into your bag of tricks and pull out handouts fresh off the copying machine, or a
game you stayed up late to create in order to bring verbs to life!
You question why you do this night after night -
After all, you worked hard all day - you deserve to put your feet up and relax!

As the class begins and you begin to teach,
Orchestrating the timing of the lessons, tuning in to every student, especially those who
try to hide behind their books,
Carefully pacing yourself, knowing when to talk and when to listen -
You suddenly realize that you have harnessed a new level of energy that propels you
Effortlessly to the end of class!
There are many intelligent, hard-working, under-appreciated adults sitting in front of you who
long to lose their unique accents as they race to become "American" -
You see beauty in their faces, their eyes; their desperation to conquer new sounds, new words,
new ways of expression,
And you want to yell out, "Don't lose yourself in your new life in these United States.

The class ends, so you pack your bag of tricks and walk silently into the night -
A warm, familiar sound makes you turn and look back -
As one of your students smile, waves, and yells out, "Good Night, Teacher!"
Teacher - you hear and feel the love and respect that envelop that word - teacher -
Ah, yes, you now remember why you do this!
I see you leave - you look tired but happy, fulfilled -
I see you, and I think, how lucky I am to know you!
The words may be simple and small,
But I say to you: THANK YOU, TEACHER.

Connecting resources for Nevada's adult workforce

Adult education glossaries available online



✓ Nevada's ABE Leadership Team has developed a glossary of terms commonly used by Nevada's ABE/ESL programs. You may access it from Nevada's Literacy Web site, www.literacynet.org/nevada. Click on "Teacher/Tutor" under Literacy Resources at the left and you'll see the link to Nevada's *ABE/ESL Glossary of Common Terms*.

✓ For a more extensive dictionary of adult education terminology, see the online, searchable document recently published by OTAN (Outreach and Technical Assistance Network). This dictionary currently contains more than 400 terms and has three search options — alphabetical, keyword, and by category. The categories include: acronyms, assessment and testing, disabilities, ESL, grammar, learning theory, legislation, professional/government organizations, reading/phonics, teaching methods/techniques, and vocational/workplace. To access OTAN's Adult Education dictionary, go to www.otan.us. Click on "OTAN resources" (along the left), then click on the "Adult Ed dictionary" icon (in the second row of icons).

OTAN provides electronic collaboration, access to information, and technical assistance for literacy and adult education providers in California, however its Web-based resources are available to all. When you visit the site, you will be asked to register. It's a good idea to do so — there is no cost and registration provides access to many additional helpful resources such as listservs and links to thousands of documents.

Today's melting pot

There are 5 million LEP (limited-English-proficient) children nationwide. Their most common native languages, in descending order, are Spanish (75 percent), Vietnamese, Hmong, Haitian Creole, Korean, Cantonese, Arabic, Russian, Navajo, Tagalog, Cambodian, Chinese (unspecified), Mandarin, Portuguese, Armenian and Serbo-Croatian.

Source: *Report on Literacy Programs*, 11/20/02, p. 178